

Race, Class, and Religious Differences in the Social Networks of Children and Their Parents

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Abstract:

The study is a qualitative investigation of mothers' perspectives about and their role in negotiating and developing intergenerational closure across race, class, and religious differences and their management of children's diverse friendships. Black and White mothers ($n = 25$) of third graders were interviewed about social networks, children's friendships, and closure relationships. Race, class, and faith were critical vantage points from which parents thought about social difference and managed closure relationships. Mothers' involvement in diverse networks reflected articulated ideologies, socialization goals, and active engagement of strategies to build relationships between parents and children. However, de facto social barriers and ideologies about the invisibility of social differences created barriers to building intergenerational closure across social differences as did mothers' perceptions of these relationships as threats to aspired to or salient identities and values.

Keywords: social network closure | intergenerational closure | children's friendships | intergroup relationships | parenting | social capital

Article:

The social contexts within which children's friendships emerge and parents' social relationships develop, from neighborhoods to places of worship, are fraught with the divisions of race, class, and religion that are a part of the social fabric of American society (McPherson, Smith-Loving, & McCook, 2001). Yet the emphasis on diversity in American public life reflects a philosophy that acknowledges and embraces the value of social and cultural differences and the importance of positive intergroup relationships not only for personal growth and development but also for a prosperous, free, and democratic society (Putnam, 2007; Willet, 1998). A great deal of attention has focused on the role of institutions (schools, government, judicial) outside the family in facilitating intergroup relationships and breaking down social boundaries. However, parents' roles in developing (or limiting) children's friendships that involve social differences have been

understudied as have the social relationships across race, class, and religion that involve both children and their parents (Furstenberg, 2005; Morrow, 1999; Parke & Ladd, 1992).

Based on a qualitative investigation, we explore the ways parents negotiate children's friendships and relationships with other parents across race, class, and religious differences with a particular focus on the strategies parents engage to cross (or to maintain) social boundaries and the ideological and social-relational processes that inform these practices. James Coleman (1988; 1990), in his theory of social capital, emphasized the importance of the social connections between families, specifically, the interconnected social networks of parents and their children which he referred to as intergenerational closure (or social network closure). Closure relationships are defined in terms of the strength of social connections among parents whose children are themselves friends. When intergenerational closure is present, parents support common norms for behavior, communicate with one another about children's activities and whereabouts, share norms to evaluate children's behaviors, and impose similar consequences for misbehavior all of which have implications for children's development, behavior, and wellbeing. It is through these relationships that parents may support socialization goals, structure parenting practices, and develop children's competences. In a diverse society, such as the United States, it is of interest to consider what processes support the development of social network closure across social differences, or that maintain the boundaries of race, class, and religion.

Children's Intergroup Friendships, the Influences of Parents, and Intergenerational Closure

The extant literature on children's friendships indicates that the social divisions associated with race, class, and religion are reflected in the friendships children are likely to form (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Children tend to develop friendships with same-race peers and to view in-group members more positively than out-group members (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Graham & Cohen, 1997). There are a variety of factors associated with racial stratification that influence the development of children's cross-racial friendships including racial preferences and attitudes, the racial ecology of schools (e.g., racial composition, philosophy), and segregation across social arenas (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Hamm, 1998; Schofield, 1986). And, not unlike race, children have a preference for peers who share their socioeconomic status (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Divisions in social class are also embedded in patterns of residential segregation, schooling (e.g., private schooling, "ability" grouping), and extracurricular activities. It is within these class-bounded social contexts that parents and children create social networks with others who share their social status (McPherson et al., 2001). It is unclear whether children have preferences for friends who share their religious background; however, the extent to which children's and parents' social relationships and activities (e.g., extra-curricular, school) are centered within a religious community will impact opportunities to develop faith-based networks (Glanville, Sikkink, & Hernández, 2008; Smith, 2003) and may increase the salience of religious differences for children. Although children's friendships are circumscribed by social differences, children do develop diverse friendships if in conducive social environs (Bruegel, 2006).

Few studies have examined parents' influence on the formation and maintenance of children's interracial friendships (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Edmond & Killen, 2009). However, recent

emphasis on racial socialization highlights the complexity of parental socialization about race within families, and the potential role of parents in the management of children's cross-racial relationships. Studies of racial socialization focus on what minority parents teach their children about how to cope with racially charged interracial social interactions and the ideologies about race that inform parents' socialization messages and strategies (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Edmonds and Killen, focused on adolescent cross-racial friendships, found that perceived parental racial attitudes impact whether or not children bring different race friends home, the closeness of these relationships, and adolescents' engagement in jokes or negative statements about these friends. Studies of racial privilege and "Whiteness" are just beginning to explore implications for children's social relationships (e.g., Moore, 2003); those based on adults suggest racial socialization messages and racial ideologies are also communicated by White parents (Frankenberg, 1993; Hamm, 2001).

In a qualitative study, Hamm (2001) explored both Black and White parents' racial socialization beliefs, parental perceptions of barriers to positive interracial friendships, and the strategies parents used to bridge these barriers. She found that regardless of race, parents endorsed colorblind ideologies; however, for Black parents this perspective was also framed by concerns about racial stratification and minority status for which parents wanted to prepare their children. Black parents saw themselves as actively engaged in negotiating barriers to adolescents' interracial friendships, and White parents looked to other social agents, particularly, schools, to promote interracial friendships. Although White parents saw exposure to differences as valuable, they were ambivalent about the actual development of cross-racial friendships, which was framed as concerns about social class rather than race.

Edmonds and Killen (2009) also found that parents express safety concerns about cross-racial friendships rather than making overt (negative) statements about race which were more likely to emerge around dating relationships.

Parents do have concerns about children's friendships with lower-status peers, with these concerns centering on problematic behaviors, values, and lifestyles (Hamm, 2001). However, we know little about how parents handle children's friendships with peers from different social classes or to what extent parents may cultivate relationships outside of their social class (either beneath or above their own). There has been an interest in interclass networks for individuals and families residing in impoverished communities; particularly the potential costs associated with class-bounded social networks that emerge within poor neighborhoods (Brody, 1990; Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Wilson, 1987). Based on a review of ethnographic studies, Jarrett (1990) highlighted community-bridging strategies that urban poor families engaged to support upward mobility; one of these strategies was to bridge to networks that were not impoverished and were not located in poor neighborhoods. Parents may also limit the development of social network closure in impoverished neighborhoods as a strategy to protect their children from risks associated with living in these neighborhoods (Brody, 1990; Caughy et al., 2003).

Places of worship are an important context within which children develop friendships and parents cultivate closure relationships (Fletcher, Troutman, Gruber, Long, & Hunter, 2006; Glanville et al., 2008; Smith, 2003). Smith examined the associations between religious involvement and the development of social network closure. He found that parents were more likely to know their children's friends, parents, and teachers when children and parents attend

weekly services and adolescents participate in youth groups. Increased involvement in religious institutions (e.g., religious schools, church-based extracurricular activities) may decrease the likelihood that parents and children will establish friendships and intergenerational closure with persons outside their places of worship or faiths. Furthermore, because places of worship within the United States remain deeply segregated by race and class, children and parents' faith-based social networks may tend to be homogeneous in these areas as well. However, membership in diverse congregations or religious communities may provide greater opportunities for families to develop closure relationships with others with whom they share common values and religious identities but who differ in racial ethnic, and class backgrounds.

Race, social class, and religious background are factors that may affect parents' approval of their child's friends (Edmonds & Killen, 2009; Hamm, 2001) and as Offer and Schneider (2007) find parents' approval of their child's friend influences friendship quality and is associated with parental attempts to form intergenerational closure. To be sure, colorblindness, tolerance, and the equality of person are tenets of American civil society; however, there are challenges associated with developing social connections across race, class, and religion. The realities of social inequality, preconceptions of "others" as unlike ourselves, de facto social barriers (e.g., residential segregation, different places of worship), and lack of knowledge about potential points of connection with respect to values, parenting, or socialization goals are barriers to forming social relationships with families of different social backgrounds (Bruegel, 2006; Hamm, 2001; Putnam, 2007). Diverse cultures, ways of living, and social identities associated with race, social class, and religious background may also shape the norms, strategies, and rituals that parents and children use to cultivate and maintain social relationships (Fletcher, Bridges, & Hunter, 2007; Lareau, 2002).

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore mothers' perspectives about and their role in negotiating and developing intergenerational closure across race, class, and religious differences as well as mothers' management of children's friendships across social boundaries. We were also interested in mothers' navigation of these social relationships during a period when children are moving into middle childhood and are exercising increased autonomy in forging friendships (Rubin, Chen, Coplan, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). To address this aim, our initial research questions focused on parental perceptions of the barriers or challenges associated with developing social network closure across race and class, strategies parents might use to traverse these boundaries or maintain them, and the ideological perspectives that may underlie different approaches to these relationships. As we began our analysis of mothers' interviews it became evident that faith identity, in the region and communities in which this study is based, was also a critical marker of social difference and identity. The analysis of the mothers' interviews also led us to a greater awareness (and subsequent model building) of the complex social processes involved in the development of intergenerational closure across race, class, and faith as well as the factors (direct and indirect) that account for its absence.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five mothers participated in a home-based semistructured interview conducted during the spring of their child's third-grade year. The sample was drawn from a mixed-method study that included 404 third-grade children and their mothers who resided in a single county within the Southeastern United States and who were enrolled in 37 classrooms in 9 public elementary schools during the 2001-2002 academic year. Twelve (48%) respondents were Black and 13 (52%) respondents were White; 16% ($n = 4$) of families were lower class (unskilled occupations, high school or less), 36% ($n = 9$) were working class (semiskilled, skilled trades, no college degree), 28% ($n = 7$) were middle class (administrative, professional, technical with at least some college), and the remaining 20% ($n = 5$) were from upper-class households (upper managerial, professional, with a college degree or higher; Hollingshead, 1975). Fifty-two percent ($n = 13$) of the participants were members of two-parent (biological) families, 32% ($n = 8$) were from two-parent stepfamilies, and 16% ($n = 4$) were from one-parent family households; 56% ($n = 13$) of the target children were female, and 44% ($n = 12$) were male. The qualitative subsample was selected to include variations in social class and family structure and comparable representation in social class and family structure for Black and White families. However, as in the larger sample, there were variations within social class categories by race. The distribution of Black families was skewed to the lower end of the range within social class categories and White families to the upper end of the range.

Community Setting

The county includes semirural areas (farm and nonfarm), suburban subdivisions, and downtown communities but does not have a metropolitan area. The two largest racial groups are Blacks (32.5%) and Whites (57%). The remaining population includes diverse racial and ethnic groups and an immigrant population of 8.5% predominantly from Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia. Black residential communities are typically socioeconomically diverse reflecting historical patterns of racial segregation. Predominantly White neighborhoods tend to be less socioeconomically diverse and represent class-based enclaves (middle class or working class). New suburban communities are racially and ethnically diverse; however, these communities remain predominantly White. The local economy is diverse but is manufacturing based and includes several long-standing colleges and universities. Most of the families we sampled owned or rented single family homes that were modest in size and located in well-maintained, safe neighborhoods. Several families resided in larger homes located in more affluent neighborhoods, and a few families lived in other housing (e.g., apartments, mobile homes). Residents in the county are largely mainline Protestant Christian (42.3%) and evangelical Christian (50.5%) which includes a wide variety of denominational and nondenominational congregations. Other religious traditions (e.g., Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhist) and places of worship are present but are few in number.

Qualitative Interviews

Mothers' qualitative interviews focused on three major areas: social network composition, parental meanings of social network closure, and children's friendships and closure relationships. Mothers were asked about their social networks, including network characteristics, parenting support provided by network members, and social network closure. To determine social network closure, parents were asked, based on a list of friends generated by their child, "Do you know

this child, the child's parents, and is this parent a member of your social network?" Mothers were then asked their perspectives about and experiences with intergenerational closure. They were asked to describe relationships where there was intergenerational closure, including the contexts (e.g., kith/kin, church, school, neighborhood, extracurricular) in which these relationships were embedded. We then asked whether any of these relationships involved individuals of different social backgrounds, and mothers were asked about the development and expectations of these relationships in contrast to relationships with children and families from a similar social background. In addition to responses to our direct queries about diverse friendships and social networks, we examined the entire transcript for any mother-initiated references to diversity (race, social class, religion, or faith identity) either in children's friendships or intergenerational closure. Mothers were interviewed by matched-race interviewers to address any potential cultural bias or cross-racial discomfort during the interview. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Mothers were compensated US\$40.00 for their participation.

Data analytic strategy. The data analytic strategy used in this study included four major phases of analysis: (1) identifying constructs, themes, or domains, (2) typology development, (3) exploring relationships, and (4) model development and testing (Miles & Huberman, 1984). During Phase 1, we conducted multiple reviews of transcripts to identify constructs, themes, domains, and their subcomponents. Protocols were piloted (with two raters) and further revised to reflect the refinement of our conceptualizations and any splintering of constructs, themes, or domains. Three to four research team members reviewed all major iterations in this process. The final coding was done by one coder and reviewed by a second coder; any differences in coding were resolved via consensus and further refinement in coding protocols was performed as needed. During Phase 2, we created typologies that were based on different levels of constructs and/or multiple themes or domains. Typologies were based on identifying differences in the levels (high/low) of a construct/ variable and using multiple themes/domains to create composite variables. During Phase 3, we developed text-based data summary tables to explore relationships and identify pathways of influence within and across cases. We looked for variations by race, class, and family type as well as for negative cases. During Phase 4, we sketched out diagrams that modeled the linkages we were beginning to see, a process that culminated in an interpretative model. We then "tested" this model by exploring its fit with each individual case, each type of intergroup relationship (race, class, religion or faith), and with attention to any variations associated with the race or social class of mothers.

Interpretative Analysis

When mothers evaluate relationships across race, class, and religion there is a process of social comparison that engages real or perceived differences between social groups (Self–Other). Emergent differences may be interpreted as opportunities (positive), as problematic (negative), or as neutral (nonsalient). These evaluations reflect not only mothers' ideologies about social difference but also their questions about what these differences (race, class, or faith) may mean for other families' morals, values, and ethics; parenting; and for their child's behavior and characteristics as they are measured against mothers' own norms, practices, and ideologies, and what they want for their child. As mothers manage diversity in children's friendships and approach the development of intergenerational closure, they may either be actively or passively engaged in the crossing or maintenance of social boundaries. These processes are embedded in

social contexts (school, neighborhood, workplace, places of worship, kindred) that vary in race, class, and religious diversity and are impacted by mothers' social locations with respect to race, class, and religion, and the intersection of the three. In the sections that follow we highlight mothers' perspectives about social differences, diversity, social network closure, as well as variations in these perspectives as they are framed by race, social class, and faith. We then illustrate the links between ideology, mothers' active or passive engagement in the development of children's friendships, and social network closure that crosses the social boundaries of race, class, and faith. Finally, throughout we discuss emergent tensions, sites of ambivalence, and the barriers to developing intergenerational closure across social differences as well as the mothers' perceptions of the promise of these relationships.

Beyond the Color Line

Families resided in a place that shares the Southern history of racial segregation and Jim Crow, but it also has a history of activism (civic and religious) with regard to Civil Rights that dates from the abolitionists to the sit-in movements. As a testament to the insignificance of race, parents emphasized that it was not a factor for them, pointed to interracial friendships, and spoke with admiration about their children who "did not see color." When parents acknowledged race as a salient social difference, White parents did so with reference to the importance of diversity and Black parents, who were less likely to engage a diversity discourse, spoke to the equality of persons.

Although there were not striking racial differences in parents' ideology, there remained differences in the ways Black and White parents talked about race. For Black parents, race was both a cultural factor and a source of inequality. In contrast, virtually all of the White parents did not mention race as a source of discrimination, exclusion, or social inequality. Thus, for Black parents a colorblind perspective affirmed social equality yet did not deny the importance of race in social relationships. For White parents, colorblindness is often an ideological stance that precludes attention to the continued influence of race and social inequality (Frankenberg, 1993).

Although not primed to do so, most parents mentioned interracial relationships involving Blacks and Whites. Parents acknowledged that interracial closure relationships "moved a bit slower" and it "probably takes longer, for the trust level" to develop because of differences. Kenisha, a Black mother of two, explains: "Well, it's different. . . . As far as like their beliefs, you know, and the things they are accustomed to, and as far as like different neighborhoods. . . . Because they are used to certain settings and we are used to certain settings." Neither Black nor White parents expressed racial prejudices or an unwillingness to develop relationships with different race families; nevertheless, parents were aware of instances when racial prejudices had been a factor in the development of closure relationships. Black parents expressed concerns about protecting their children under these circumstances. Genise, a Black working-class parent, offers: "I try not to see color. I really try not to. And then after things occur and then I may say, now I see why." With the exception of one White parent, who expressed concerns about how racist attitudes of family and friends might impact her son's views, White parents did not mention the ways racism, stereotypes, or prejudices either had or might affect the development of interracial closure relationships.

Despite the history of race relations and the social geography (i.e., segregation) of Southern communities, there are many aspects of Southern social life that promote interracial contact and relationships. For example, Black and White Southerners share cultural and religious traditions; there is a significant Black presence and a history of interracial contact, and the persistence of Southern folkways (e.g., personally engaging others, politeness, friendliness). Newcomers (migrant and immigrant) are also breaking down longstanding divisions in the racial and ethnic composition of schools and neighborhoods. It is not surprising then that almost all of our parents reported that their children had interracial friendships; however, interracial network closure was far less common. As Cathy, a White parent, noted, “Of course he has Black friends he hangs out with. Not that—we hang out with them but not as often.” When close interracial closure relationships were formed parents (a) expressed a valuing of diversity and cultural pluralism or a colorblind perspective that acknowledged race, (b) viewed experiences with diverse people as a socialization goal, and (c) engaged in strategies to facilitate relationships that crossed into the private sphere of the home. Martha, a White working-class parent of three children, who indicated she “constantly seeks out diverse relationships,” illustrates these influences. She described her socialization goals:

I hope what they are learning is to be friends with everybody to allow everybody the opportunity to know you. . . . You know, good, bad, every race, every walk of life, . . . I think [my girls] are kind to everyone.

She further shares a story that shows how her interracial social networks are framed by the practice of colorblindness on one hand and the recognition of cultural diversity on the other. She recounts a story where her two girls became cognizant of the race of a Black friend, the child of her coworker and friend. It is story with which she affirms both similarity and difference and reflects on how race enters, sometimes in an unexpected way.

We were very close and she had two little boys . . . and one morning I was cooking breakfast for him and the girls were two and three. And they said, “What color are your eyes?” . . . “My eyes are blue, what color are your eyes? My eyes are brown.” And all of a sudden, the whole table turned around and say, “Jonathan, are you an African American?” . . . You know like it was a realization, they obviously have different cultures and lifestyles, their relationships with their parents . . . the mother and I would talk [about] the different ways we handled things.

Both Black and White parents mentioned the openness of children to forging relationships across race; indeed, there was a consensus that “kids don’t see color.” The racial and ethnic diversity of schools, neighborhoods, extracurricular activities, and sometimes churches provided opportunities for social contact and the development of children’s friendships. Some parents, often reflecting liberal progressive views about diversity or a desire to facilitate their child’s friendships, actively engaged closure relationships with their children’s friends’ parents. Vanessa, a Black upper-class mother of two, speaking about her family’s experience in an ethnically diverse neighborhood, explained her approach: “Like in this neighborhood Kurien is Indian, um Kevin is . . . from Ecuador. And Phillip has just a wide range of friends. And so in

order to help him understand them and their culture . . . I need to know their parents.” For parents who adopted progressive diversity strategies, diversity in the school and the community was seen as an opportunity for both children and parents, as is illustrated by Jean, a White middle-class mother of four:

We are very fortunate to have such a diverse community and our children go to school with children from everywhere. . . . It’s really a global community, its right here in [our] county. I think we can learn a lot, just by talking to each other about parenting.

She later reflected, “I just think it’s really important that people love people and accept them for their differences.”

The workplace also offered opportunities for the development of interracial closure relationships. Social network closure among families of different races that built on parental relationships in the workplace was particularly evident among the working class. Barbara, a Black mother of three, described workplace-based closure relationships that crossed racial boundaries: “Like people from my job that work in the office with me. I go over to their house and take my kids and all the kids just get together and just play like, you know kids don’t see color.” Middle-class parents, Black and White, more frequently discussed neighborhood-based interracial closure relationships (reflecting the diversity of newly developed communities). However, these relationships, though often characterized as close, maintained a certain kind of social distance that was less evident among working-class families. Anne Marie, a White middle-class parent, describes her closure relationship with a Black parent:

I mean we did not socialize a lot . . . they belong to the club but don’t really do club activities . . . and you know we are there in the neighborhood. . . . I mean we were good friends and we would go out to lunch and stuff . . . but I didn’t know her husband very well.

Parents did not report actively discouraging their children’s interracial friendships or not being open to closure relationships with different race parents, but Black parents did at times monitor their children’s interracial friendships for the adverse reactions of White parents. Benita, a Black middle-class mother of two, explained, “I’m a little more cautious with trying to figure out if she [White parent] really mind my daughter being friends with her daughter.” Benita further reports that she feels White parents are cautious as well. This is a barrier she has resolved by being “upfront with it, and they [White parents] are always receptive.” For this mother, who has forged interracial closure relationships, “the bottom line is we all were trying to raise our children to the best of our abilities . . . and that is what matters.” However, tensions between Black and White parents were not always resolved; Lisa, a Black working-class mother, recounted, “I think they were kind of against people of color, and I guess they did not want them [the children] to get too close.” If a child was rebuffed, parents might then use the experience as an opportunity for racial socialization. Genise, a Black working-class mother, who reported they were the only Black family in their apartment complex, explained, “. . . in the beginning . . . I look at the person for who they are.” However, she remains vigilant about how race may be factor in her child’s attempts to develop friendships: “Race has a

lot to do with it. . . . I want him to get to know his neighbors. I mean I'm not saying that I don't neither, but if I do, I do. If I don't, it's no biggy 'cause I'm not a child anymore." Now, because her son has experienced being excluded because of his race, she says he is now seeing people's "true colors."

Identity, Values, and Breaching (Lower) Social Classes

Parents may have been hesitant to discuss race, but those who did drew on a readily available discourse that is a prominent part of American political life. However, as Ortnier (1998) has argued, social class is often "displaced or spoken through other languages of social difference." (p. 8). Parents expressed concerns about "safety," "lifestyles," and "negative conditions" of lower-status families, which included substance use, language (bad), sexuality, HIV/AIDS, gang behavior, and cleanliness. When parents specifically addressed social class they did so to express apprehensions about the influence of lower classes, their experience of class disjuncture, and interclass tensions. Although a few parents relayed experiences of class exclusion, they were more likely to discuss potential interclass relationships in juxtaposition to the lower classes and, to a lesser extent, class privilege. That is, parents were more likely to consider class differences with respect to relationships with children and families whose class status was beneath their own. When parents and children traversed class boundaries they did so because the relationships grew out of specific social contexts (i.e., neighborhoods, schools), were connected to kith and kin networks, or reflected parental ideologies about class pluralism and children's acceptance of different-status persons.

As children breached the boundaries of social class, parents monitored their children's friendships and the home and neighborhood environments, lifestyles, and living conditions of their children's friends and their parents. Approaching the issue of class with some delicacy, more affluent parents did at times acknowledge that they were not in the same social circle or did not do the "same things" as families who did not share their class position. Though it was rare for parents to explicitly acknowledge defending class boundaries against the potential influences of lower-status peers and their parents, a White middle-class parent candidly discusses her apprehensions about her daughter's beginning relationship with a homeless girl who she met at day camp, Rebecca recounts:

One day she [daughter] told me she made a new friend and I was glad and I was like, "Oh great, where's she live?" "Well, she doesn't live in a house or an apartment, it's a shelter." You know, so if she's living in a shelter, I know that I'm not going to be able to develop any kind of relationship with that person.

Regardless of the setting, parents who were apprehensive about interclass closure relationships engaged in strategies to mitigate the influence of lower status friends and their parents by being actively involved in the settings in which children interacted with friends and their parents or by limiting exposure to what they viewed as problematic activities and peers. The experience of class tensions and a feeling of being out of sync with interclass networks (neighborhood-based and kith and kin) became the catalyst for the most extensive parent reflections on class, closure relationships, and identity. Susan, a White mother of three, who described her family as "highly

educated but poor,” expressed concerns about her son’s lower-status neighborhood friends and their parents. Uneasily a part of neighborhood social networks with which the family had little in common with neighborhood families, she monitored and evaluated the home environments and lifestyles of her child’s neighborhood friends and their parents:

Sadly a lot of them, I shouldn’t say a lot but some of them do come home to empty homes and their parents are gone. . . . [Y]ou know, single parent families and everything, some of them are just pretty well on their own to roam the neighborhood until mom gets home and that kind of bothers me.

She continues with concerns about what her child might be exposed to with some of the neighborhood families.

Part of my concern with [a neighbor] is that they yell at their kids so much I wonder if it’s a constant thing. . . . I would not want them [her children] in an environment where there was a lot of, you know, real vulgar language, or even drinking.

Blacks were more likely than were Whites to live in neighborhoods and communities that were socioeconomically diverse, reflecting long-standing patterns of residential segregation by race (Chafe, 1980). Because interclass closure relationships were likely to be embedded in the neighborhood, church, and family networks of Black families, class diversity tended to be a feature of Black kith and kin networks. However, Black parents varied in how they managed and interpreted class differences in their personal networks. A Black middle-class mother described her support for relationships with impoverished relatives and friends: “I take them [her children] over there and I usually stay with them and let them play and when we go to our home town, a couple of my relatives, you know, live in the projects.” However, class differences within personal networks of parents can be a source of tension; particularly, if parents feel these relationships undermine socialization goals or their class aspirations for their children. Lisa, a Black working-class mother of three, expressed the class-related tensions she feels within her network, specifically, its implications for her aspirations for her son’s social mobility:

I have some friends that are um, I guess poverty-stricken, low-income, I mean you know just believing welfare or the system, or whatever . . . that could be very negative because I want him [son] to know . . . you can get your education you can do what you have to do and um, still get out there and make a living. . . . You know I want you [son] to work hard and be able to take care of your own family.

To encourage the openness that their children brought to friendships or as an outgrowth of their own values, there were examples of parents who facilitated or supported children’s friendships with different-status peers. Nancy, a White working-class parent, describes her son as knowing “people from all walks of life . . . people with money, and without money.” In addition, some parents encouraged the development of “helping” friendships with lower status peers. Nancy also talked about her son being a mentor to a Black boy: “he’s [son] a part of the Big Brother organization. And, Michael is pretty good

friends with that little boy.” Jean, a White middle-class parent, discusses her daughter’s pairing with a Black classmate who had trouble at home and in making friends:

[the teacher] thought [daughter] could be a good friend to him and I tried to help her with some of the issues she was dealing with, you know this is a great opportunity to be a friend because I explained how he might have trouble making friends and keeping friends and, feeling good about team work because he doesn’t get a lot of help at home.

Parents who supported helping friendships with lower-status peers valued these relationships for their children; however, these relationships did not extend to the other parent and intergenerational closure.

A Matter of Faith and Values

We began this work with an interest in understanding the development of social network closure that crossed race and class boundaries; it later became evident that faith was also a critical marker of social difference and identity for the parents interviewed. Indeed, religious faith and participation in faith-based communities are an important part of Southern life (Woodberry & Christian, 1998). Among Southern evangelical Christians and Black Protestants being saved (accepting Christ as your personal savior) or being born-again is a salient aspect of one’s identity (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001; Sernett, 1991; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Regardless of race and social class, mothers who identified themselves as Christians discussed the ways their faith, values, and beliefs informed their evaluation of children’s friendships as well as the desirability of intergenerational closure. However, either through experience with interfaith relationships or as a matter of ideology, most parents expressed the importance of religious tolerance across different faith traditions. When families attempted to negotiate closure relationships across faith and religion, the challenge was to find a common ground and a comfortable position for tolerance.

Christian parents, who linked their parenting and their faith, acknowledged how religious values influenced the closure relationships they cultivated, as one parent stated “I’m just a bit more comfortable [with parents from church] because I feel they believe in God . . . they are training their children . . . about God and the things we should be doing.” Among Christians, non-Christian lifestyles were viewed as a potential threat to parenting standards, as a parent shared, “I want to know if they raise their child like I raise mine. . . . It depends on the type of lifestyle the parents are holding in their homes . . . because I’m a Christian.” Debra, a Black working-class mother of two, described both the process of monitoring her child’s friendships and the importance of Christian identity and moral and religious values in evaluating appropriate friendships for her child:

A classmate of Valerie’s she wanted her to come and spend the night. . . . And I could see some of the things that the friend was saying, you know talking real grown and dressing real grown. . . . So, I laid it out, “Well, this is what God wants us to be, and God wants us to go in this direction. Can you see her [child’s friend] doing any of these

things. . . She was like, “Mommy, I don’t see it.” So I said, “Okay. Where are we trying to go and what are we trying to do?”

Although Christian-identified parents expressed apprehensions about the negative influences of the unfaithful, their anxieties about interfaith relationships were marked by uncertainty about differences in ritual and social interaction, and there were questions about whether differences in religious foundations created too wide a gulf between families. Debra, who discussed how she handled her child’s friends whose standards of conduct were inconsistent with her religious values, did find a common ground with a Jewish family. The relationship began tentatively and ended with the discovery that the religious differences were not as great as she feared:

We allowed the girls to be together while we was there to watch, you know, we felt like . . . we need to know who you [other parent] are before we let our child go by your [home] . . . ‘cause her religion foundations are different from ours. . . . Actually [the children] taught each other about each other’s backgrounds . . . now [daughter] knows that everyone doesn’t have the same god and they don’t pray to the same god in the same way or they have the same god but praises him different ways.

Despite the differences in religious beliefs, Debra found she had much in common with this parent with respect to parenting. Because they shared beliefs about parenting, she explains “that made things a lot easier.”

Parent contacts with newly arrived religious minorities grew out of relationships children forged primarily in their neighborhoods and, to a lesser extent, in their schools. Parents who discussed their contact with new religious minorities (particularly Muslims) focused on differences in language and social custom rather than differences in religious beliefs. That is, parents talked about these interfaith contacts as more a matter of culture and ethnicity rather than religion. For example, parents reported that they try to help their children better understand differences in social customs. LaToya, a Black lower-class mother of two, who was living in a neighborhood that included several different immigrant groups, explained her relationship with Muslim neighbors. Her expectations were that “you know to treat everyone fairly and see what they have to offer and talk because you learn different things from different people.”

It is not surprising that mothers did not express religious bigotry, nor did they report being ostracized because of their religious beliefs, as none reported that they were members of a religious minority. Nonetheless, whether in matters of faith or religion, parents acknowledged some of the challenges of developing and maintaining closure relationships when parents varied in their beliefs and/or approaches to their faith. Martha, a White working-class parent who was involved in a long-standing closure relationship in which there were differences in Christian religious ideology, explained that when one parent is “more dogmatic, and one may be more liberal . . . finding that middle ground is important.” Reflecting on how to respect differences, Mary Anne, a White working-class parent suggested:

I think depending on how different children are brought up, the parents

expect you to, kind of, operate within their structure, their belief system. I don't think they expect you to . . . influence the child in another direction necessarily; I think that's something you have to respect.

Yet it is with greater comfort and ease that religious parents developed closure relationships with other families that shared their faith and devotion, as one parent offered, "Most of the people we are in contact with . . . do believe the way we do as far as religion. . . ."

Mothers' active involvement in network closure that crossed social boundaries often grew out of articulated ideologies, socialization goals, and identity. It was through the engagement of active strategies with respect to the development of diverse closure relationships that parents sought to create and manage social relationships and interactions that either supported or did not undermine what they valued or what they lived. At other times, mothers engaged active strategies to manage, limit, or thwart children's friendships and intergenerational closure when social differences were perceived as a threat to aspired to or valued identities or were thought to undermine core values or socialization goals. But some mothers cast themselves as distant observers of their children's friendship choices, with respect to friends from different social backgrounds, rather than as arbiters. These mothers draw little or no connection between their children's friendship choices and parental socialization messages or values about social differences. This is a stance that often precluded the development of intergenerational closure with families from different social backgrounds.

Colorblind Ideologies, de facto Barriers, and the (In)visibility of Social Difference

Not unlike the American population at large, most parents expressed moderate ideologies about race, class, and religion, that is, tolerance and colorblindness. However, parents also reflect the ambivalence and tensions about race, class, and religion that are a part of the larger political and cultural landscape of the United States. It was not uncommon for parents who were not proactively engaged in closure relationships with families of a different race, class, or religious or faith background to indicate they knew little about the social background of their children's friends and their parents, much less sought to actively cultivate or discourage these relationships. This is a stance that is consistent with parental perspectives about the invisibility of social differences. Yet parents' passive engagement in children's intergroup friendships tended to preclude the development of intergenerational network closure and often supported the maintenance of social boundaries.

The invisibility of social differences and their lack of importance for social relationships was a dominant sociopolitical narrative among parents (Frankenberg, 1993; Hamm, 2001; Schofield, 1986). A parallel narrative was the invisibility of social differences for children, who forged relationships in spite of them. As Kristen, a White middle-class parent, remarked, "I don't know if it's [the school] or this generation. I don't think they see it [differences]. I like that. . . ."

Although parents may have viewed the invisibility of social differences as a progressive catalyst for their children's diverse friendships, the result of child-initiated boundary crossings without parent engagement was often the invisibility of friends themselves. For example, when later asked to reflect on her experiences with diverse closure relationships, one mother reports, "Uh (pause) see right now some of the girls I know I couldn't even tell you what color they are."

Thus, passive engagement resulted in the marginalization of children's friendships that involved social differences. As a result, children's friendships with diverse peers remained bounded by the contexts in which they were forged and social network closure was not cultivated.

There is an irreconcilable tension between narratives of social invisibility and the reality of de facto social boundaries that are connected to the social divisions of race and class, and matters of faith and religion, and ultimately, the homogeneity of social networks. Despite parental ideologies about the invisibility of social differences, it is the salience of race, class, and religion for social life that impinges on and creates challenges for the development of social network closure across differences. Although parents viewed their children's openness to diversity with admiration, it was also acknowledged that social differences often meant that families inhabited different social worlds. White parents, with some uneasiness, reflected on the difficulties of developing closure relationships across social differences, as Mary Anne shares,

I don't really know the parents well. . . . I guess, its just, its well I don't see them as often so I guess it would take longer [to develop a relationship] because you don't really interact with them as often as you do people who are in the same community, so to speak.

Being a part of the "same community" suggests more than one's neighborhood and includes the interconnected social contexts within which families create close social relationships and develop a sense of community and identity. Thus, as children forged diverse friendships, parents often found it difficult to create intergenerational closure that built on these friendships. Jackie, a White working-class parent, reflects on the impact of social distance on the development of closure relationships:

There may be, you know, an acquaintanceship, not so much a friendship, you know, with someone of a different background, but far as a friend, a true friend, you know, would I, in the sense, um no I don't think there is.

Summary and Conclusions

Studies from a variety of fields have considered diversity and intergroup relationships as they relate to adult, child, and adolescent relationship formation and maintenance patterns (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). The current effort extends this work to explore mothers' role in cultivating, managing, and limiting children's intergroup friendships as well as the development of social network closure across race, class, and religion and faith. Moreover, the qualitative approach used provides insights into the social-relational, ideological, and ecological factors that inform mothers' perspectives and that impact the development of social network closure across social differences. We found that race, class, and religion are critical vantage points from which mothers think about social difference and manage closure relationships. Mothers' ideologies, perspectives, and behaviors reveal tensions and ambivalences about social differences as well as a belief in and hope for what we aspire to be: colorblind and tolerant of differences. Mothers are cautious about what social differences may mean for other families' parenting practices, their

moral, ethics, and values and their children's behavior. Even when mothers express an openness to develop relationships with families of different backgrounds and support for children's intergroup friendships, de facto social barriers help to maintain the social distance between families. Furthermore, well-meaning ideologies of tolerance among mothers that erased differences are as likely to lead to homogeneous social networks as are active and insidious sources of social division (e.g., prejudices, intolerance).

Whether or not mothers actively cultivate intergroup relationships, their children and families still navigate diverse schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Indeed, mothers talked about intergroup relationships even when they were not primed to do so, illustrating both what went right and went wrong when developing social network closure within diverse communities. Although it was common for mothers to indicate that their children did not see difference between people, mothers often acknowledge it was difficult for them to forge close relationships with families who were unlike themselves. There were three important pathways to developing intergroup social network closure given this challenge: First, shared and ongoing experiences in contexts where there is equity in social position (e.g., all working on shop floor or living in the same neighborhood) can be a catalyst for meaningful friendships between families; second, committed social ideologies about diversity and inclusiveness that lead mothers to proactively seek opportunities to develop relationships across social differences; and, finally, the discovery of similar values through tentative social interactions often building on children's friendships.

We focus on the experiences and perspectives of Southern mothers, Black and White families, all of whom are Christian. Race, ethnicity, and region inform a sense of place and the language used to engage diversity and social difference. In addition, how mothers approached identity and diversity could not be divorced from the social and historical realities of place. For example, this is evident in the importance of faith identity for Southern mothers and in the paradoxes of racial closeness and distance that characterize both the old and new South. Like many areas in the South, the community from which our families were drawn is experiencing a transformation with respect to increased racial and ethnic diversity and immigrant populations and in the presence of non-Christian religious groups. These emergent populations were not included in this study; however, mothers reflected on their presence in the ways they self-defined diversity and difference (e.g., we are a global community). We focused here on the largest racial groups with long-standing histories within the community, but it is also important to extend this work to include the emergent subpopulations; particularly, those for which language, immigration, and patterns of acculturation may constitute additional boundaries to negotiate as well as religious minorities (e.g., Muslims) who are also newcomers to the South. Given the importance of place for intergroup relationships, we must also explore other regional and community contexts where there are different histories of racial, ethnic, and religious groups as well as different politics of intergroup relationships than those found in the South.

The relationships between children and their connections to their friends' parents are required for social network closure; however, we did not include children's perspectives about these relationships. Mothers often commented on the abilities of their children to make friends with everyone or commented on their tolerance, but we did not examine how children themselves thought about intergroup friendships. And if, indeed, children are leading the way through the friendships they build, an important question is to what extent parents follow their children's

lead when developing intergroup relationships and social network closure. Moreover, what are children's perspectives about their parents' attitudes and how those attitudes influence the friendships they develop. We focus on middle childhood, a developmental period in which children are beginning to exercise more autonomy in the selection of their friends, including developing intergroup friendships. But as children move into adolescence, peer networks become increasingly homogeneous (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Graham & Cohen, 1997; Hamm, 1998). This shift may be driven by the desire for peer similarity and the salience of racial and ethnic identity; however, parent support for homogeneous peer networks may also become more heightened during adolescence, especially given the potential of intergroup dating (Edmonds & Killen, 2009). It is of interest to further explore whether the development of intergroup friendships and social network closure in early and middle childhood will lead to less retreat to homogeneous networks as children move into adolescence and later as adults.

Coleman emphasized strong ties in the development of social network closure; however, other theorists have highlighted the importance of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and less dense networks (Burt, 1992) as sources of new information and as opportunities to cultivate more diverse resources. In this study, we follow Coleman's framework on intergenerational closure with an emphasis on strong ties; however, our findings suggest that social network closure across social differences is a challenge to cultivate. To cross social boundaries between families, weak ties may be used to build social and cultural competencies for parents and children and may provide them with the social-relational tools (i.e., social competencies) needed to later build stronger ties. Given our sample size, we could not systematically examine intergenerational closure with both strong and weak ties; however, mothers did report about both and also the evolution of intergroup relationships that became close. In addition, our aim was to explore social network closure that included the social connections among parents whose children are themselves friends. However, we find several instances of intergroup social networks that are not closed. For example, there are children's friendships for which parents do not know one another or their child's friend, parent has relationship with child's friend but does not know the other parent, and friendships between children but ambivalent or tense relationships between parents. These variations in intergroup social networks involving children and their parents warrant further study.

This qualitative investigation revealed how mothers engage diversity and difference in the development of intergenerational closure whether it be embraced, approached with trepidation, or with self-protection and the shoring up of social boundaries. A fundamental tenet among advocates of diversity and inclusiveness is that we, as a society and as individuals, are made better by having a rich variety of social relationships and cultural exposure (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Putman, 2007). Diversity and shared identity in civil society begins with social relationships, and intergenerational closure is one mechanism through which we may develop a sense of our shared humanity. A challenge for families is to find opportunities to explore similarities and differences with other families that vary in race, social class, or religion and faith. We need to understand more about how intergroup social network closure is developed given de facto barriers and how these relationships may affect children's social competencies and the friendships they develop as they age as well as their impact on parents' attitudes and intergroup relationships, and, finally, on the communities in which families live.

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